

CLOSED CAPTIONING: NOT JUST FOR DEAF MINISTRIES

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Author's note: My book, *Inside Captioning*, published in 1997, has much more information on this topic. A case study of captioning in a Texas church from the book is [available online](#).

Closed captioning is known as a way for deaf people to watch television. That sounds wonderful for a huge, high-budget television ministry, but what could it do for a church service? Why not just use a sign language interpreter?

Closed captioning is a way to expand your ministry not only to deaf people, but to many hard-of-hearing people (especially the elderly) and to people just learning English as a second language. This article will describe how closed captioning works, and why it could be right for you.

What is closed captioning?

We've all seen the little "cc" symbol on the television set indicating that a show is closed captioned. Very few hearing people, however, understand what it means. For over ten years, it has meant that a deaf person could buy a special box called a *caption decoder* and connect it to their television to see subtitles on the screen. The "closed" captions are visible only to people with decoders, as opposed to "open" captions, which are visible to everyone.

The decoder will become superfluous soon, because a new law will take effect. As of July of this year [*This was written in 1993, and the Television Decoder Circuitry Act is in effect-gdr], all television sets with picture tubes 13" or greater will be required by law to have caption decoders built in. Already, at least one major television manufacturer (Zenith) is offering televisions with this capability. Currently, over 400,000 Americans have caption decoders for their televisions. After July, this number will increase by over 1,500,000 *per month*, giving captioning to 20,000,000 households in the first year.*

Today, virtually all national news programming is captioned, as is most prime-time programming on the principal networks. Major sporting events, press conferences and talk shows are captioned as well. Christian broadcasting, on the other hand, is mostly unavailable to the deaf and hard-of-hearing.

The captions appear on the television screen (if you have a decoder) as text. They can either be set to "roll up" at the bottom of the screen, or "pop on" anywhere on the screen. Typically, during services or live programming, the words roll up at the bottom of the screen as the speaker talks.

Where do the captions come from?

The words to hymns can be pre-typed into the captioning system, and fed out onto the TV a line at a time

for the congregation to follow. These are called "live display" captions. This is a wonderful aid to the hearing people that don't know the words, and it can even be used for prepared announcements or speeches.

For a sermon, however, you want the congregation to catch *all* of the words, even those sections that are totally extemporaneous. The only person who can type what you say, as you say it, at speeds of up to 250 words per minute, is a court reporter.

"Realtime" captioning technology uses a court reporter with a special phonetic steno keyboard, and a computer that translates their phonetic shorthand into English using a specially prepared dictionary. This is how captioning is performed for national news broadcasts, sporting events, seminars and talk shows. Court reporters that perform realtime captioning are often called "stenocaptioners," because they use the steno keyboard for their captioning.

There is a third type of captioning, called "offline" captioning, which is used for videotapes. It uses time coding technology to allow you to edit the captions on a computer and attach them to specific frames of video.

How can it help *your* ministry?

It is a common misconception that closed captioning is only for deaf people. You will often hear it referred to, in fact, as "closed captioning for the hearing-impaired." In reality, it is a much more general aid to understanding oral communications.

Even in the best of churches, the acoustics in the sanctuary aren't perfect, because there are a lot more criteria to the design of the sanctuary than just sound. It isn't only the deaf and seriously hearing-impaired people that sometimes have trouble understanding what is being said. Elderly people often develop loss of hearing just within one register. This might mean that they could hear and clearly understand a woman's speech, but not the deeper voice of a man.

Captioning provides the text of the sermon on a normal television monitor or projection TV so that people can watch both the face of the person speaking *and* the words being spoken. This close-up of the minister helps truly deaf people with their "speech reading," which involves reading lips, expressions, gestures and body language.

People learning English as a second language are helped as well, because when they first hear an unfamiliar word, they can look at the screen to see how it is spelled, and possibly recognize it from their reading. It is easier for them to follow written English, where they don't have to worry about accents and pronunciation. They are likely to recognize in print names of people and places from the Bible, which they may never have heard spoken.

Offering captioning in your church will not only better serve your existing congregation, but will allow you

to spread the Word to those you aren't reaching today. The age group that most wants and needs to hear you is the elderly. These are people who may be embarrassed that they don't hear as well as they used to, and will either sit in the pew without comprehending the sermon, or simply won't come.

When word gets around about your captioning, you will attract new members to your church. Elderly parishioners will bring their friends. Deaf people will spread the word through their community. People learning English will better be able to learn from you because of these captions, and they, too, will appreciate what you are doing to help them, and spread the word to their compatriots.

Why not just use a sign language interpreter?

American Sign Language (ASL) is not just a rendition of English. It is a beautiful and expressive language in its own right, one with its own vocabulary, syntax and sentence structure. It is a language that takes years to master. If you provide an ASL interpreter in your church, you are doing a wonderful thing for prelingually or culturally deaf members of your congregation.

Those deafened late in life, however, or elderly people who experience a loss of hearing less than total deafness, usually don't invest the necessary time required to learn ASL. It is estimated that only 10% of the 24,000,000 deaf and hard-of-hearing people in the United States know sign language. Captioning serves the other 90%.

Additionally, following an ASL interpreter can be fatiguing. You can't look away, even for a moment, or you may miss something. It requires fixing your eyes on the interpreter (*not* on the speaker!) and concentrating for the duration of the service. Captions keep up to four lines of text on the screen at a time, allowing you to look away for a moment, and then catch up.

ASL is not the only sign language, either. Signed Exact English (SEE) is a sign language that uses English word order and syntax, and there are other methods for deaf communication as well, such as cued speech, in which hand motions are used to assist a speechreader in distinguishing between sounds. Once again, no matter whether a deaf person's prime mode of communication is ASL, SEE, speechreading or cued speech, captions can increase their comprehension of your sermon.

What does captioning cost?

The main cost involved in broadcast captioning is the stenocaptioner that writes the captions. With over 40,000 court reporters in the United States, however, there is a decent likelihood that there is somebody in your town, possibly already a member of your church, that would volunteer their services *pro bono*. Any reputable captioning system supplier should be able to help you find a stenocaptioner.

The equipment required consists of a standard IBM-compatible "386" personal computer, the captioning software, a caption encoder, and the video camera and television that you may already have. Every court reporter/stenocaptioner has their own steno keyboard, which is adjusted to their touch, so you won't need

to supply that.

The computer, software and caption encoder as a package cost about \$10,000 to \$11,000. The video equipment can be anything from professional gear down to the standard consumer video cameras and televisions available at your corner video store.

Typically, the cost of the captioning software will include training, assistance in selecting your video equipment and connecting it, creation of a translation dictionary for your court reporter/stenocaptioner, telephone support and assistance in finding a stenocaptioner.

How do you get started?

Now you've seen that captioning benefits not only deaf people, but hard-of-hearing, and elderly people, as well those learning English as a second language. You've seen how it can help your ministry and expand your congregation. So how do you actually do it?

The first step is to talk to a captioning company and find out exactly what you would need. You can then look at the demographics of your membership to determine how many deaf, hard-of-hearing and elderly people you have. Also, consider how many are learning English as their second language.

You may also wish to talk to some of the organizations for the deaf, hard-of-hearing and elderly in your area to see what their spiritual needs might be and whether they can work with you in your ministry.

These organizations include:

- AARP - American Association of Retired Persons
- ALDA - Association of Late Deafened Adults
- NAD - National Association for the Deaf
- SHHH - Self-Help for Hard of Hearing People

Again, your captioning software company should be able to help you to locate these organizations.

Spread the Word

There are millions of Americans who can't hear what you say, and millions more who can't understand what they do hear. With captioning, you can enrich the lives of these people that you can't reach today, and you can help your congregation to understand your message.

How can you lose?